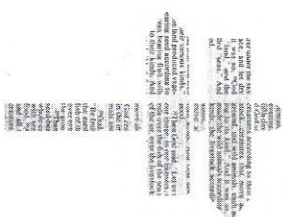


BOOK 1

BEING TRULY HUMAN

THE LIMITS OF OUR WORTH, POWER,
FREEDOM AND DESTINY



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THE QUEST FOR REALITY AND SIGNIFICANCE

Book 1 – BEING TRULY HUMAN:

The limits of our Worth, Power, Freedom and Destiny

Book 2 – FINDING ULTIMATE REALITY:

In Search of the Best Answers to the Biggest Questions

Book 3 – QUESTIONING OUR KNOWLEDGE:

Can we Know What we Need to Know?

Book 4 – DOING WHAT'S RIGHT:

Whose System of Ethics is Good Enough?

Book 5 – CLAIMING TO ANSWER:

How One Person Became the Response to our Deepest Questions

Book 6 – SUFFERING LIFE'S PAIN:

Facing the Problems of Moral and Natural Evil

HUMAN FREEDOM AND THE DANGER OF ITS DEVALUATION

Every human being, man or woman, boy or girl, of whatever race, colour or creed, from whatever part of the world, has a right to be treated as an end in himself or herself, never as a mere statistic, or simply as a means of production, but as a person with a name and a unique identity, born to be free. So we all feel, and so we all say.



FREEDOM: EVERYONE'S BIRTHRIGHT

With all of us, whatever our worldview, freedom ranks among the highest of our ideals. Freedom, we feel, is every human being's birthright: no one has the right to deprive us of it against our will (except, of course, in cases of proven criminality). Even to attempt to remove someone's freedom is a crime against the essential dignity of what it means to be human.

Actually, in the practicalities of life there are situations where we all voluntarily surrender some of our personal freedom for the sake of some common good. We do so in small matters like, say, football (soccer). On the field ten of the players agree to submit to the directions of the captain, and all eleven agree to play according to the rules of the game under the authority of the referee. No player claims the freedom to play according to his own rules: no game would be possible under such conditions. Likewise we voluntarily surrender part of our personal freedom in more important contexts. As citizens of a civilised state, for instance, we voluntarily (in theory, at least) forego part of our freedom as individuals, as do all our fellow-citizens, and submit to the laws of the land for the sake of the higher good of enjoying the benefits of living together in a peaceful and cultivated society.

But when it comes to the right of every human being to his or her essential freedom, all of us, whatever worldview we hold, would agree that this right is, or should be held to be, inviolable.¹ It, therefore, rightly rouses our indignation to see any human being enslaved, treated as nothing more than a cog in a machine, a mere means to the end of another person's pleasure or profit. Every human being, man or woman, boy or girl, of whatever race, colour or creed, from

¹ Perhaps this is an exaggeration. Too often, these basic human rights are not held to be unbreachable, and worthy of respect and protection. In some parts of the world there is still a sorry failure to achieve the four essential human freedoms: freedom of speech and expression, freedom of every person to worship God in his own way and to propagate his faith (or not to worship any god and to propagate atheism), freedom from want, and freedom from fear.

whatever part of the world, has a right to be treated as an end in himself or herself, never as a mere statistic, or simply as a means of production, but as a person with a name and a unique identity, born to be free. So we all feel, and so we all say.

DISAGREEMENT ON THE BASIC CONDITION NECESSARY FOR HUMAN FREEDOM

But when it comes to the basic condition necessary for the realisation of full human freedom, we find that the two major groups of world-views, the theistic and the atheistic, diametrically disagree as to what that condition is.

The fundamental question is this: Is the human race the highest and sole rational authority in our world—or in the universe as far as we know and as far as it affects us? And are humans, as a race, therefore completely free to decide how they shall behave, what is wrong and what is right, what humanity's ultimate values are, what, if any, the purpose of their existence is, and what their ultimate goal, their *summum bonum*, should be? And are they ultimately responsible to none but themselves, with no one to answer to?

Or is there a God who, having created the universe and human-kind within it, has the right to lay down, and has in fact laid down, not only the physical laws of nature, the boundary conditions of humankind's existence, but also the moral and spiritual laws that are meant to control their behaviour? And is it so that humanity in general, and individual men and women in particular, are held responsible by this God for the way they behave and will be called upon at last to render account to him?

It is no secret that atheists and theists disagree intensely over this question; but there would be little point or profit in simply noting the fact, or in observing that the disagreement has been accompanied in the past by a certain amount of intolerance. The more rational attitude would be for theists and atheists to attempt to understand each other, not only each other's beliefs, but the deep-seated feelings that lie behind and motivate those beliefs. The resultant growing understanding of each other's position, and of the reasons why those positions are so tenaciously held, should at least remove any blind

intolerance and lead to a greater respect for each other as human beings. So let us make the attempt.

THE VARIOUS KINDS OF ATHEISM

The first thing that we ought to do in order to understand the atheistic position is to observe that not all atheists are the same. Atheism, for instance, is not in and of itself necessarily attached to any one particular political philosophy. Some are ardently attached to communism, or socialism, some to democracy of one kind or another, some left wing, some right. In what follows we shall not be concerned with atheists' political preferences, but simply with their atheism.

We should next observe that atheists come in different strengths, so to speak.

Some are little more than agnostics who simply don't know for sure whether there is a God or not. They hold that there is no evidence, or not sufficient evidence to justify belief in the existence of a god of any kind; and in the absence of such evidence they style themselves as atheists; and some go further and admit that, if they came across evidence for God's existence that satisfied them, they would accept it and abandon atheism.

Some atheists maintain that it is the scientific attitude to life that compels them to be atheists in spite of the fact that their atheistic interpretation of science attributes a bleak meaninglessness to the universe and to human existence. The humanist Kurt E. M. Baier expresses this attitude well:

The scientific approach demands that we look for a natural explanation of anything and everything. The scientific way of looking at, and explaining, things has yielded an immensely greater measure of understanding of, and control over, the universe than any other way. And when one looks at the world in this scientific way, there seems to be no room for a personal relationship between human beings and a supernatural perfect

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being ruling and guiding men. Hence many scientists and educated men have come to feel that Christian attitudes towards the world and human existence are inappropriate. They have become convinced that the universe and human existence in it are without a purpose and therefore devoid of meaning.²

Other atheists admit that science cannot prove that there is no God; but then they confess that they have an emotional preference for atheism. Isaac Asimov, president of the American Humanist Association from 1985 to 1992, said in an interview:

I am an atheist, out and out. It took me a long time to say it. I've been an atheist for years and years, but somehow I felt it was intellectually unrespectable to say one was an atheist, because it assumed knowledge that one didn't have. Somehow it was better to say one was a humanist or an agnostic. I finally decided that I'm a creature of emotion as well as reason. Emotionally I am an atheist. I don't have the evidence to prove that God doesn't exist, but I so strongly suspect he doesn't that I don't want to waste my time.³

Some atheists are embarrassed by their atheism. The famous French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre remarked:

The existentialist, on the contrary, thinks it very distressing that God does not exist, because all possibility of finding values in a heaven of ideas disappears along with Him; there can no longer be an *a priori* Good, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it. Nowhere is it written that the good exists, that we must be honest, that we must not lie; because the fact is we are on a plane where there are only men. Dostoevsky said: 'If God didn't exist, everything would be possible.' That is the very starting point of existentialism. Indeed, everything is permissible if God does not exist, and as a result man is forlorn, because neither within him nor without does he find anything to cling to. He can't start making excuses for himself.⁴

Other atheists do not like the term 'atheist', and would prefer some such neutral description as 'non-theist'. The reason is that the

word 'atheism', by its very linguistic formation, contains a reference to, and negation of, theism. It is a negation of (a previously or generally held) belief in God. For that reason Karl Marx disliked the term:

Atheism . . . is no longer meaningful, for atheism is a *negation of God* and seeks to assert by this negation the *existence of man*. Socialism no longer requires such a roundabout method; it begins from the *theoretical* and *practical sense perception* of man and nature as essential beings. It is positive human *self-consciousness*, no longer a self-consciousness attained through the negation of religion.⁵

Still other atheists scarcely deserve to be dignified with the term 'atheist', for the simple reason that they have never given any serious thought to the question whether there is a God or not. They have just unthinkingly and without question imbibed a completely secular way of thinking about life and living.

THE MOTIVATION BEHIND DOGMATIC ATHEISM

It is obvious, then, from what we have found so far that it would be unfair to lump all atheists together and to ascribe to all of them the same motivation for their atheistic beliefs, or to suppose that they all hold to their atheism with the same strength of conviction.

On the other hand, when we survey leading atheistic philosophers of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, we find a strikingly clear and similar motivation behind their philosophical systems. That motivation has little or nothing to do with science. It is not that science has made belief in God impossible for them, and thereby forced them to work out some completely secular philosophy. It is that they are determined to stand for man's total and absolute freedom and autonomy. To recognise God, or any

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² 'Meaning of Life', 296.

³ Interview with Isaac Asimov, 9.

⁴ *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, 22.

⁵ 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts', 43.

concept of God as creator and supreme moral authority, would in their opinion degrade man, compromise his freedom and destroy his essential dignity. Therefore, and for that reason, any notion of God must be rejected, and they look to science to confirm them in this stance.

The existentialist Sartre for instance, is very open and honest on the topic. His position is consistently atheistic; but the basis and heart of it is not founded on proofs for the non-existence of God. As we have already noticed, he admitted that for certain reasons the non-existence of God was an embarrassment to him and to existentialists in general. But he makes it clear that even if God existed and were his creator, nevertheless for the sake of man's total freedom to will nothing but his own freedom, in every station of life, man would resolutely stand over against God in radical independence.⁶

It is in this spirit of determined independence of God that in one of his plays Sartre makes Orestes say to Jupiter, 'What have I to do with you or you with me? We shall glide past each other, like ships in a river, without touching. You are God and I am free.'⁷

In other words, it would make no difference for Sartre whether science could or could not prove God's existence or non-existence. The motivating force at the heart of his philosophy is this determination to be absolutely free, in the sense of being utterly independent of God.

But not all atheists were, or are, existentialists like Sartre. So let us look at some characteristic views of other representative atheistic philosophers, drawn from Germany, France and the United States of America; one is pre-Marxist, another is Marx himself, one is another kind of existentialist, and the rest humanist.

Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-72)

We have reduced the supermundane, supernatural, and super-human nature of God to the elements of human nature as its fundamental elements. Our process of analysis has brought us again to the position with which we set out. The beginning, middle and end of religion is MAN.⁸

⁶ See Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, 51-5.

⁷ *The Flies*, 159.

⁸ *Essence of Christianity*, 184.

My fellow-man is *per se* the mediator between me and the sacred reality of the species. *Homo homini Deus est*.⁹

This German philosopher's philosophy had considerable influence on Marx.

Karl Marx (1818-83)

In the Foreword to his doctoral thesis Marx wrote:

Philosophy makes no secret of it. Prometheus' admission "I hate all gods" is its own admission, its own motto against all gods, heavenly and earthly, who do not acknowledge the consciousness of man as the supreme divinity.¹⁰

A man does not regard himself as independent unless he is his own master, and he is only his own master when he owes his existence to himself. A man who lives by the favour of another considers himself a dependent being. But I live completely by another person's favour when I owe to him not only the continuance of my life but also its *creation*, when he is its source.¹¹

And, therefore, Marx was not prepared to acknowledge God as mankind's source, creator and sustainer, for to acknowledge any such Being superior to man himself, would be to compromise man's absolute autonomy:

Religion is only the illusory sun about which man revolves so long as he does not revolve about himself.¹²

Man is the highest being for man.¹³

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-61)

Professor Patrick Masterson comments on the French philosopher Merleau-Ponty's philosophy thus:

⁹ Latin for 'Man is man's God'. *Essence of Christianity*, 159.

¹⁰ 'Difference between the Natural Philosophy of Democritus and the Natural Philosophy of Epicurus', 15.

¹¹ 'Difference', 5.

¹² 'Difference', 15.

¹³ See 'Difference', 17-19.

Obviously this metaphysical viewpoint precludes the affirmation of a divine absolute. In particular, Merleau-Ponty points out, it precludes the Christian belief in God the Father as the creator of heaven and earth. Such a belief, he argues, undermines the conception of man as an irreducible source of genuine historical meaning and value and engenders a stoical attitude of unavailing quietism. For it envisages God as an absolute being in whom all knowledge, beauty and goodness have been achieved from all eternity. Human endeavour is rendered meaningless and the *status quo* invested with the stamp of divine approval. No endeavour on our part can add to the perfection of reality since this is already fully realised in an infinite manner. There is literally nothing to do or to accomplish. We are petrified and impotent beneath a divine gaze, reduced to the condition of *visible things*. All our inner resources are alienated by an infinite wisdom which has already disposed all things well.¹⁴

Christians would doubtless be astonished at this, to them bizarre, description of the effect that belief in God is supposed to have on believers, and will protest that they have never found it so themselves or anything like it. But such a protest is for the moment beside the point. What we should notice in Merleau-Ponty is the recurrence of this idea that belief in God is rejected because it is felt to compromise, restrict, negate and virtually abolish man's freedom and potentiality.

Views of leading modern secular humanists

First, we should notice the significance of the adjective 'secular' in this label 'Secular Humanists'. Humanism of itself stands in an honoured tradition dating from the Renaissance and is exemplified by men like Erasmus and Leonardo da Vinci. It has been, and still is in some countries, applied as a general label to the subjects taught by those who profess 'the humanities', i.e. the study of literature, philosophy, the arts, ancient Greek and Latin language, literature and philosophical anthropology. In a still more general sense nowadays

a sympathetic practical concern for the welfare of others is referred to as humanism. This present series with its 'quest for reality and significance' could rightly be called humanist.

But in the course of the twentieth century, in some countries, and especially in the United Kingdom and the United States of America, the title 'humanist' has been taken over by people in all walks of life—and often in influential academic, teaching, legal and political positions—who hold that mankind can develop its full potential only by denying the existence of God (or gods), rejecting all religion and supernaturalism, and creating a totally anthropocentric society. Their interpretation of humanism is well summed up by Professor Paul Kurtz: 'humanism cannot in any fair sense of the word apply to one who still believes in God as the source and creator of the universe.'¹⁵

To save confusion, therefore, throughout the rest of this book the terms *humanism* and *humanist* will be used to refer only to this type of secular, atheistic humanism. It is hoped that readers will bear this in mind.

Now let us consider some representative statements of the secular humanist view.

Arthur E. Briggs, '[A] Humanist is one who believes in man as centre of the universe.'¹⁶

J. A. C. F. Auer (of Harvard University): 'Man would worship God if man felt that he could admire God. But if not, if God fell below the level of moral excellence which he, man, set up, he would refuse his worship. That is Humanism—Man the measure of all things, including religion.'¹⁷

Blanche Sanders: 'A Humanist has cast off the ancient yoke of supernaturalism, with its burden of fear and servitude, and he moves on the earth a free man, a child of nature and not of any man-made gods.'¹⁸

Sir Julian Huxley: 'For my own part, the sense of spiritual relief which comes from rejecting the idea of God as a supernatural being is enormous.'¹⁹

¹⁵ 'Is Everyone a Humanist?', 177.

¹⁶ 'Third Annual Humanist Convention', 53.

¹⁷ 'Religion as the Integration of Human Life', 161.

¹⁸ *The Humanist* 5 (1945), 226.

¹⁹ *Religion Without Revelation*, 32.

¹⁴ *Atheism and Alienation*, 143–4.

It is clear, then, what motivation lies behind these expressions of pre-Marxist, Marxist, existentialist and humanist atheism. Its heart-beat and resolute ambition is human freedom: man completely independent of God and absolutely autonomous; man as the ultimate authority on everything; man as the measure of all things, the centre of the universe. It is this motivation that then demands the denial of



It is this motivation that then demands the denial of God's existence and the banishing of any and every concept of a supernatural creator, since to admit God's existence would compromise man's freedom.

God's existence and the banishing of any and every concept of a supernatural creator, since to admit God's existence would compromise man's freedom.

Here, then, is what many atheists regard as the fundamental, necessary condition for the realisation of man's freedom. What do theists say to that? They do, of course, take it seriously together with its supporting arguments; and we shall presently give a detailed analysis of this 'flight from God', as it appears to theists. But for the moment it might be helpful to make a few comments from a theistic point of view on the atheists' stance so as to clear up some potential misunderstandings before we get down to the detailed analysis.

The cry for freedom

The first thing that theists might want to say is that they, just as atheists, acknowledge, approve of, and value the instinctive desire of the human heart for freedom. In itself that desire is altogether healthy, and, as theists would say, God-given. It is, moreover, both fundamental and central to their experience of God.

Religious Jews, for example, will point to the experience that was the original, formative element in their existence and identity as a nation: their nation's deliverance, which they believe God effected for them, from the slave labour camps of pharaonic Egypt in the second millennium BC. The clarion call of God's prophet Moses to the pharaoh: 'Let my people go that they may worship me' has resounded in Jewish hearts all down the centuries. They have celebrated it ever since in the annual Feast of Passover (Pesach). The faith it has fos-

tered in God as Sustainer and Liberator has maintained their hope during the many oppressions they have since suffered in the course of the centuries at the hands of totalitarian, anti-Semitic governments. Christians will add that release and freedom are the essential core of the gospel of Christ. They will quote Christ's programmatic statement of his mission:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. (Luke 4:18-19)

Or they will cite Christ's promise to his disciples:

If you continue in my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth shall set you free. . . . I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. . . . So if the Son shall set you free, you will be free indeed. (John 8:31-36 our trans.)

It would be pointless for atheists to object that Christ is simply talking about moral and spiritual freedom, whereas what atheists are interested in is real freedom, that is, social and political freedom. If you survey again the quotations from the atheistic philosophers which we cited a moment ago, you will see that when they demand independence of God, it is precisely moral and spiritual freedom that they are claiming for autonomous man. Marx is objecting to God being his creator. Marx demands to be his own master who owes his existence to himself. Julian Huxley is expressing his sense of spiritual relief, which comes from rejecting the idea of God as a supernatural being, not relief at being free to change his political party. And as to Christians' ongoing relationship with God, and what it feels like to them as they experience it, Christians will affirm as true what the Apostle Paul says:



Then you will know the truth, and the truth shall set you free. . . . I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. . . . So if the Son shall set you free, you will be free indeed.

—John 8:32-36

For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!' The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ. (Rom 8:15–17)

When, therefore, Christians hear an atheist like Blanche Sanders talking about casting off 'the ancient yoke of supernaturalism with its burden of fear and servitude', they might well want to ask precisely what version of supernaturalism or religion she is referring to. More of that in a moment.

But with that there comes into focus one major point in the debate between atheism and theism. Both promise freedom. But what does each of them mean by 'freedom'? And which promise carries the greater likelihood of practical fulfilment?

Atheists' criticism of religion

Underlying the atheists' determination to throw off any concept of a Creator God is often their criticism of religion—born out of personal experience, who knows?—as an oppressive enslavement of the human spirit, and a cause of man's alienation from his true self.

The response of a Christian would be to agree with the criticism, to this extent at least, that mere religion, as distinct from a living personal faith in the living God, easily degenerates into a form of slavery. It is most important to notice that the Bible itself points out the danger of this happening. When the Apostle Paul exhorts his fellow Christians: 'For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery' (Gal 5:1), the yoke of slavery he refers to is a form of legalistic religion. He earlier describes it as:

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid I may have laboured over you in vain. (Gal 4:8–11)

In this area the atheists' mistake, as the Christian sees it, is that in seeking to escape from oppressive, legalistic, superstitious and opiate religion, they reject God who himself denounces such religion.

The sins and crimes of Christendom

There is no doubt that these have led many people to reject all religion in favour of atheism. The Christian response is to confess them without reserve. They have been inexcusably wrong. Christendom's use of the sword to protect and further Christianity; its torture and burning of Jews and so-called heretics; its fostering of the Crusades, its sack of Byzantium, and slaughter of the Turks supposedly in the name of Christ; its frequent connivance at the oppression of the poor—all these have been wrong and sinful. Nor is it any mitigation of Christendom's offences, to point out that atheistic governments have frequently been guilty of similar oppression. Christendom has less excuse. Its behaviour has been in open, flagrant disobedience to the plain teaching of Christ. It has not been Christian behaviour at all; for Christ himself strictly forbade his disciples to use the sword for either the protection or the furtherance of his kingdom (John 18:10–11, 33–37; 2 Cor 10:4–5).

On the other hand, it would not be fair to blame God or Christ or his apostles for the disobedience and sins of Christendom any more than it would be fair to blame Stalin's purges on the teaching of Marx. And as for Marx's compassion for, and championing of, the proletariat, true Christianity is no less outspoken in its denunciation of capitalists who oppress their workers:

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days. Behold, the wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the

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harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you. (Isa 5:1–6)

And, incidentally, it was a Christian, William Wilberforce, that campaigned for, and achieved, the abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire.

The atheists' claim regarding human freedom

The claim is that the way to human freedom is to reject all man-made gods. Let's return to the statement by Blanche Sanders:

A Humanist has cast off the ancient yoke of supernaturalism, with its burden of fear and servitude, and he moves on earth a free man, a child of nature and not of any man-made gods.²⁰

Jews, Christians and Muslims would unitedly applaud the getting rid of all man-made gods. The worship and service of such man-made gods demeans man and always tends towards his enslavement. But to confuse the true and living, self-existent God, Creator of heaven and earth, with man-made gods, is a category-mistake of the first order. Jews, Christians and Muslims would point out that it is precisely the rejection of the One True God that has consistently, and indeed inevitably, led mankind throughout history to adopt man-made gods, be they physical, metaphysical, philosophical or political, gods that in the end rob human beings of both their dignity and freedom.

FREEDOM AND THE DANGER OF ITS DEVALUATION

Introduction

So far we have listened to a number of atheists telling us in their own words what the motivation was, or is, behind their adoption of athe-

ism. It turned out to be a profound and powerful desire for freedom that would, as they saw it, establish man as independent of any higher power, and thus completely autonomous. To assert and enjoy such freedom, they argued, it was necessary to banish all belief in God.

Now we shall let a theist speak and give his analysis of the human situation. He will argue that rejection of God, far from increasing human freedom, actually diminishes it; leads to an anthropocentric ideology that is pseudo-religious; and implies that each individual man and woman is a prisoner of non-rational forces which will eventually destroy them in complete disregard of their rationality.

The analysis comes from the pen of Paul, the Christian apostle. Paul was a Jew, and in addition had inherited the civic honour of being 'a citizen of Rome'. He was fluent in both Aramaic and Greek, had studied theology in Tarsus and Jerusalem, and had travelled widely throughout the Roman Empire. He thus had first-hand knowledge of the hundred and one different kinds of religion that populated the world of that day.

He had also debated with both Stoic and Epicurean philosophers (see Acts 17). Stoics believed that a creative and controlling Intelligence lay at the heart and centre of the universe and pervaded every aspect of it. This Intelligence, however, was, according to them, part of the stuff of the universe and impersonal. Stoics thus were what we should call pantheists; but they are significant for us today in that they were an early example of the attempt to explain the systematic nature of the world and to develop a thoroughgoing system of ethics without postulating the existence of an other-worldly reality.

Epicureans, on the other hand, were thoroughgoing materialists. According to them there was nothing in the universe but matter and space. Man's body, brain, mind and soul were composed entirely of atoms. At death man disintegrated. There was no afterlife, and therefore, no final judgment (at which thought the famous Roman Epicurean, Lucretius, rejoiced exceedingly).²¹ What gods there were—and Epicureans did not deny there were some—were utterly unconcerned with man, his world, and his behaviour. Man was completely free and autonomous. His *summum bonum* was pleasure.

²⁰ See p. 67.

²¹ *De Rerum Natura*, Book I.

From this we may observe that the philosophical materialism that most atheists have adopted in recent centuries is actually no new idea. Some philosophers had in fact advocated it for centuries before

Paul was born.²²

Paul, then, was aware of the highly diverse elements in his contemporary society; and he was far from thinking that all men and women are exactly the same in their particular beliefs, in their particular unbeliefs and in the motivation that lies behind either or both.

He held that mankind's movement away from God began at the very beginning of the human race. He even thought, which may well surprise us when we first meet it, that a great deal of religion with its professed belief in gods and the supernatural had its deep-seated roots in that original movement. He was aware, moreover, that some philosophers understandably adopted atheism in intellectual and moral disgust at the absurdities and immoralities of the polytheistic idolatry of their contemporary world.

On the other hand he recognised that amidst all the welter of contemporary worldviews there were people who were doing their best to discover the truth about God, whether he existed or not, and what he might be like if he existed. This he remarked on to the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers in the Areopagus at Athens, quoting with approval two of Greece's poets, Epimenides the Cretan and Aratus (Acts 17:28).²³

In his analysis Paul begins with a description of mankind's original flight from God and with the ongoing and increasing effects that it had had on subsequent generations, setting their fundamental pattern of thinking. He was challenging his own contemporaries to examine themselves to see whether they too were pursuing this same flight from

God that had marked their ancestors and doing so from the same motives. In that challenge he includes us, his modern-day readers. His analysis forms the first part of a longish letter that he wrote to the Christian community in Rome around the year AD 57. In what follows we shall not attempt to cover the whole analysis; we shall study those of its salient points that are immediately relevant to our present discussion. But here, for the sake of reference, is the text of the whole passage.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen.

For this reason God gave them up to dishonourable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God,



Paul was aware that some philosophers understandably adopted atheism in intellectual and moral disgust at the absurdities and immoralities of the polytheistic idolatry of their contemporary world.

²² Likely in the first decade of the first century AD.

²³ The words 'for in him we live and move and have our being' form the fourth line of a quatrain preserved from a poem attributed to Epimenides the Cretan (around 600 BC, but actually from much later). The phrase 'for we are also his offspring' is part of the fifth line of a poem (fragment) by the Cilician poet Aratus (born 310 BC).

insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's decree that those who practise such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practise them. (Rom 1:18–32)

The human race's progressive loss of freedom

Historically, humanity originally knew God and recognised that the truth about the universe and about themselves was that both it and they owed their existence to a Creator God (1:18–21). But humanity deliberately repressed, or stifled, this knowledge of God (1:18); they did not care to have, or retain, God in their knowledge; they did not regard it fitting, they refused, to acknowledge God (1:25). And the next step on this flight from the true and living God was the deification of humans, animals and the forces of nature (1:23, 25), with its resultant polytheism, and devaluing of humanity both spiritually and morally.

It will immediately be objected that the assertion that originally humanity knew the One True God and only later descended into polytheism and animism reverses commonly accepted ideas on the historical development of religion. Before we proceed, therefore, we must turn aside to consider a theory that has been widely influential.

The theory of the evolution of religion

This theory was, of course, widely accepted from Darwin's time up until the middle of the twentieth century, and perhaps still is in some places. It is easy to see how plausible it seemed at first. If humankind had evolved from the lower primates, as Darwin suggested, then it followed logically that humankind's religion must have evolved as well. As Julian Huxley remarked:

In the evolutionary pattern of thought there is no longer either need or room for the supernatural. The earth was not created: it evolved. So did all the animals and plants that inhabit it, including our human selves, mind and soul as well as brain and body. So did religion.²⁴

²⁴ *Essays of a Humanist*, 82–3.

Indeed, there would, according to the theory, have been a time when early humankind had no religion at all, other than the basic fear of anything strange and threatening such as animals are said to have.²⁵ After that, so the theory claimed, religion evolved progressively from magic and animism (the idea that there are spirits, or a spiritual force, or *mana*, in everything, that must be treated with religious respect), to polytheism, to henotheism (i.e. one major god per family, tribe or nation) to monotheism.²⁶ Eventually, many people predicted, monotheism would itself be left behind as evolution carried humankind forward to scientific atheism and to freedom from all religion and irrational beliefs.

This evolutionary theory became widely popularised by scholars like the famous Sir J. G. Frazer (1854–1941), whose book, *The Golden Bough*, is still in vogue in some quarters even today. The trouble with the theory, however, is that it was based on insufficient and inadequate fieldwork and was largely speculative and untrue to the facts. To take two examples of this:

The trouble with the theory is that it was based on insufficient and inadequate fieldwork and was largely speculative and untrue to the facts.

When Charles Darwin came to Tierra del Fuego in 1833 he believed that he had discovered an aboriginal people with no religion at all. The tremendous impact that his news had on the British people is still being felt today. And this in spite of the fact that fifty years ago a scholar who took the time to live with the Fuegians and to learn their language and customs reported that the idea of God is well developed, and that there is no evidence that there ever was a time when he was not known to them. His name is Watainaiva which means Eternal One.²⁷

An explorer . . . addressing the Royal Geographical Society about his safari up the Nile through southern Sudan in 1861,

²⁵ What A. C. Bouquet called 'Animatism', i.e. 'belief in a vague, potent, terrifying inscrutable force' (*Comparative Religion*, 42).

²⁶ The term 'monism' (as distinct from 'monotheism') is used to denote the religio-philosophical idea that all true being is one. This idea pervades much of Buddhism, Hinduism and New Age thinking. 'One thing really exists—Brahman, and there is no second. Like salt in water Brahman pervades the wide universe. The Atman—the principle of life in man—is the same as Brahman' (Eastwood, *Life and Thought in the Ancient World*, 62).

²⁷ Cited from Newing, 'Religions of pre-literate societies', 14–15.

said: 'Like all other tribes of the White Nile they have no idea of a Deity, nor even a vestige of superstition; they are mere brutes, whose only idea of earthly happiness is an unlimited supply of wives, cattle and . . . Beer'.²⁸

Yet perhaps the greatest book written on the religion of a pre-literary society has one of these tribes as its subject matter—*Nuer Religion*, by Professor E. E. Evans-Pritchard (formerly Head of the Institute of Social Anthropology, Oxford). He writes, 'The Nuer are undoubtedly a primitive people by the usual standards of reckoning, but their religious thought is remarkably sensitive, refined, and intelligent. It is also highly complex.'²⁹

Equally thorough and patient fieldwork among other pre-literary societies has consistently come up with similar findings. As a result, the idea that primitive tribes had been discovered who had no religion, and that this confirmed the theory of the evolution of religion, has been discredited.

But not only so. The sequence through which, according to the theory, the evolution of religion was supposed to go, from magic all the way up to monotheism, has likewise been discredited. For religion and magic recur to this present day side by side even in highly advanced civilisations; witness, for example, Japan. It is impossible, therefore, says E. O. James 'to maintain evolutionary sequences along the lines adopted by Tylor, Frazer and their contemporaries'.³⁰

Moreover, as for the idea that religion eventually evolved from polytheism to monotheism, fieldwork by anthropologists among numerous pre-literary societies has frequently shown that the actual development was the other way round: from monotheism, to monotheism compromised by the addition of lesser gods, to polytheism.

Samples of the worldviews of pre-literary societies

Wilhelm Schmidt (1868–1954) reported that he found among the Pygmies of Central Africa a clear sense of the existence of one Supreme Being to whom all other existences, natural or supernatural,

are subject.³¹ He and his collaborators went on to claim that a belief in some supreme being is of almost universal occurrence. It can be found in ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Iran and China, but has in each case been combined with, or overlaid by, polytheistic beliefs and practices.³²

Dr E. K. Victor Pearce reports Evans-Pritchard as remarking:

Whereas before the 1930s an evolutionary concept of religion was that it developed from animism and magic to polytheism and then finally to monotheism, fieldwork reversed this, and anthropologists now realise that belief in one Creator God preceded all other religious concepts. This gradually corrupted to polytheism, and finally to the placating of an extensive array of nature spirits.³³

In 1954–55 Dr Leo Pospisil began to study the Papuans of New Guinea. Living in a high mountainous area, cut off from all contact with surrounding tribes, they were unaware of the rest of the world. Theirs was a New Stone Age culture, still in its aboriginal state. In his book *The Kapauku Papuans*, Dr Pospisil gives the following account of their beliefs:

The universe itself and all existence was *ebigate*, 'designed by *Ugatame*', the Creator. *Ugatame* has a dual nature: he is supposed to be masculine and feminine at the same time, is referred to as the two entities, and is manifested to the people by the duality of the sun and the moon. To my inquiry whether *Ugatame* was the sun and the moon I received as an answer a firm denial. . . . Sun and moon are only manifestations of *Ugatame* who thus makes his presence known to the people. . . . *Ugatame* is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent, credited with the creation of all things and with having determined all events.³⁴

²⁸ *Origin and Growth of Religion*, 88, 191 f. and elsewhere.

²⁹ Schmidt, *Origin and Growth of Religion*, 251 ff.; James, *Christianity and Other Religions*, 51–4, 60–2.

³⁰ *Evidence for Truth*, 191.

³¹ p. 84.

Edward G. Newing gives it as his view, after some years of experience in Africa:

Most, if not all, pre-literary people have a belief in a Supreme Being which most scholars call a High God to distinguish him from the lesser divinities. It has been argued that 'Pagan peoples have a clear notion of a high god *now*, as fulfilment of a hazy idea *before*' because of the impact of Christian missions. This may be true in certain cases, but on the whole most pre-literary societies' concept of God was quite clear and well-formed before the arrival of the missionaries. True, in the majority of instances he takes very little interest in the affairs of men, contenting himself to play the part of a disinterested observer; yet it is interesting to note that among some of the most backward peoples of the world clear and high ideas of God are to be found. . . . In general the Supreme Being is a sky-divinity. He is the Creator, or Originator of the creation. He is not often worshipped and shrines to him are rare. When all else fails, however, he is appealed to since he possesses power more than any other spirit or man. To trouble him too much, most Africans believe, is only to ask for trouble. For ordinary everyday matters the living dead, nature-gods and manipulation of the *mana* are of far greater importance.³⁵

Now these and many other examples of the worldviews of pre-literary societies do not by themselves afford cast-iron proof that monotheism was the primitive belief of all such societies. But as Robert Brow remarks: 'original Monotheism gives an explanation of many historical facts which are very intractable on the evolution of religion hypothesis.'³⁶

So much then for the evidence gathered from pre-literary societies by trained anthropologists to the effect that an original monotheism was subsequently overlaid by polytheism and animism.

But we have two much more powerful and accessible witnesses to the fact that the ever present tendency of mankind is to fall away from faith in God and yield to idolatry of one kind or another.

³⁵ 'Religions of pre-literary societies', 38.

³⁶ *Religion, Origins and Ideas*, 13. Here is an example of an abductive inference to the best explanation (see Appendix, p. 266), used here in the field of social anthropology.

The religious history of Judaism and Christianity

Judaism's monotheism, according to their own sacred records, had its roots in God's revelation of himself as the One True God to their progenitor, Abraham, who was called out of his homeland as a protest against polytheism, which in his time had become universal. Yet Judaism, on its own confession, frequently compromised this original monotheism, as not only the people but also their priests lapsed into the idolatry, superstition and polytheism that prevailed among the surrounding nations. Again and again their prophets, like Elijah, Isaiah, Ezekiel and Jeremiah, had to call them back to the worship of the One True God because of their repeated compromises with idolatry, which were eventually brought to an end only by their exile to Babylon.

Christianity in its turn was born in strictly monotheistic Judaism; but in later centuries it exhibited this same tendency to lapse into pagan idolatry (to the great and understandable revulsion of Islam). Among pagan Greeks, men who had been outstanding in their lifetime were after death elevated to the status of being 'heroes'. Cultic ritual was performed at their shrines, prayer was offered to them and miracles were thought to happen in their name from time to time. Christendom eventually adopted a similar practice: outstanding men and women were elevated to the status of sainthood after death; statues were made to them, their shrines and relics were venerated; prayer was made to them, and benefits, if not miracles, expected from them. In some countries to this day one can even find congregations of people who add to their Christian traditions a good deal of outright pagan ritual and practice.

The theory of the evolution of religion, then, with its idea of the straight ascent from animism through polytheism to monotheism, has not survived the results of rigorous fieldwork and research; and it goes against the trend which we see exhibited by the human heart throughout history. It is now discredited. We can, therefore, leave discussion of it and return to our main theme.

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The human race's progressive loss of freedom and its underlying cause

The human race's flight from God, Paul argues, was deliberate. It did not happen through inadvertence or carelessness. They repressed, they stifled, the truth (Rom 1:18). They did not see fit, they refused, to retain God in their knowledge (1:28). Knowing God, they did not glorify him as God, or give thanks to him (1:21).

Those last words in particular, 'or give thanks to him', are a key to understanding their motivation. To thank someone for a helping hand, or for a gift, great or small; to thank a surgeon for saving one's life even; such gratitude can be expressed without surrendering one's sense of independence. With God it is different. Start thanking him, and you will never be done with it. For to glorify him as God is to acknowledge that we are dependent on him for everything, from the planet we live on to the elements necessary for the building of our bodies; for the sunlight and for the ozone which filters out the sun's harmful rays; for the breath in our bodies, the food for our mouths, the circuits in our brains and the intelligence of our minds; for the coding in our cells, and for the moral laws written on our hearts; in short, for life and for everything. To glorify God as God and to render him thanks is to confess, cheerfully and gratefully, our utter dependence on God. And that, says Paul's analysis, is what men have found distasteful and have refused to do.

How true is the analysis? And how far is it applicable to modern humanity? Let's remember what, a few pages ago, we heard Marx say:

A man does not regard himself as independent unless he is his own master, and he is only his own master when he owes his existence to himself. A man who lives by the favour of another considers himself a dependent being. But I live completely by another person's favour when I owe to him not only the continuance of my life but also its *creation*, when he is its source.³⁷

Marx was not willing to acknowledge such dependence on God. Remember, too, how we heard Sartre speak of his determination to stand resolutely over against God in radical independence.

³⁷ 'Difference between the Natural Philosophy of Democritus and the Natural Philosophy of Epicurus', 5.

But the desire to be independent of God, so Paul held, goes back a long way in human history. It is an essential part of man's fallenness. According to the Bible the initial sin was not something lurid like murder; it came about when man listened to the tempter's voice suggesting that the way to a full realisation of human potential was to grasp independence of God and take the forbidden fruit in defiance of God's warning of its deadly consequences: 'You shall not surely die,' said the serpent, 'For God knows that when you eat of it . . . you will be like God, knowing good and evil' and thus not have to depend on God to lay down what is wrong and what is right (see Gen 3:1-5).

Man succumbed to the temptation, says the story, though still in full awareness of God's existence. It was not that he had come to doubt that there was sufficient evidence to justify continuing to believe in God, and so decided he must take his destiny into his own hands. Even when he grasped at independence of God, he still believed in him—and fled from him, trying to hide from him among the trees of the garden (Gen 3:9-10).

So, in the Bible's account, began man's flight from God. It was the prototype of what would be the behaviour of subsequent generations. Still to-day many think that if they immerse themselves in the affairs of life, or in the scientific study of the universe, they will be able to escape their innate awareness that there is a God.

But for a creature to attempt to live in independence of the Creator, is to live at cross-purposes with reality. Which is why Paul's analysis, 'For although they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him', follows on with a description of the logical consequence: 'they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened'. Or as another, vigorous translation puts it: 'hence all their thinking has ended in futility, and their misguided minds are plunged in darkness' (Rom 1:21 NEB). That does not mean to say that atheists are not intelligent. They are—many of them brilliantly so. It does mean that their atheism leads to a worldview which, in existentialist terminology, is ultimately absurd, as we shall later see.

Still today many think that if they immerse themselves in the affairs of life, or in the scientific study of the universe, they will be able to escape their innate awareness that there is a God.

The human race's flight from God, says Paul's analysis, was not only deliberate and motivated; it was culpable. 'They are without excuse' (1:20), there is no possible defence for their conduct. How so? Because men and women have shut their eyes and refused to see the evidence of God's everlasting power and deity which lies plain before their eyes, because God himself has made it plain to them. The text runs:

For since the creation of the world God's invisible attributes, that is, his eternal power and deity, have been clearly seen, being perceived from the things he has made. (1:20 our trans.)

Now the assertion that, by looking at creation around us, everyone can see clear evidence of God's power and deity, is hotly disputed by many. 'We can't see it,' they protest. 'We would believe it, if you could prove it. But you can't prove it.'

The analysis, however, is very carefully worded. It does not say you can prove God's existence from nature by the abstract reasoning of philosophical argument. It is, indeed, a very sensible thing that it does not say that. Many of God's human creatures are not blessed



Things like the beauty of music or poetry, love and loyalty, are not perceived, grasped and enjoyed only by means of abstract philosophical reasoning. Neither is God's existence.

with highly developed powers of abstract thinking such as philosophy demands. If, then, knowledge of God could be arrived at only by people who possessed such powers of logic, multitudes would be permanently—and highly unfairly—barred from it. In any case, things like the beauty of music or poetry, love and loyalty, are not perceived, grasped and enjoyed only by means of abstract philosophical reasoning. Neither is God's existence.

Paul uses two Greek words. One is *kathorao*, which means 'to observe something attentively with one's eyes'. The second one is *noeo*, and means both 'to see something with one's eyes' and then 'to perceive something with one's mind'.

Thus one could observe a painting attentively with one's eyes, and then perceive with one's mind how magnificent it is, and what a genius the artist must have been to conceive such a grand design in his mind and then execute it with such brilliant success on his canvas.

It is so with the world and the universe around us. The more

closely and attentively we look at it, the more clearly we perceive that it is clearly designed. That means it must have had a designer, and that designer not only had vast power, he must have been supernatural, that is, divine. All can see it if they will. It does not take outstanding skill in philosophical logic to perceive it.

But Paul is about to argue that many people do not want to see it. It is not that they can't or don't; it is that, seeing it and then its implications, they deliberately suppress it. Is this analysis fair? Let's recall some modern examples.

Sir Francis Crick, discoverer of the DNA double helix, gives it as his opinion that 'the origin of life seems almost a miracle, so many are the difficulties of its occurring'. Yet he remains a determined atheist and, rather than admit a creator, pushes the problem of life's origin into outer space and suggests life must have originated there and subsequently have been transported to earth.

Professor Richard Dawkins remarks: 'Biology is the study of complicated things that give the appearance of having been designed for a purpose.'³⁸ So he can see what every human being sees and knows in his heart to be true. But then he rejects the 'Conscious Designer' theory in favour of the bleak theory of natural selection, which he describes as 'the blind, unconscious, automatic process which Darwin discovered . . . which . . . has no purpose in mind. It has no mind and no mind's eye. It does not plan for the future. It has no vision, no foresight, no sight at all.'³⁹

Why then, we might ask, does Dawkins prefer the Darwinian to the Conscious Designer theory? For he himself admits that 'it is almost as if the human brain were specifically designed to misunderstand Darwinism, and to find it hard to believe.'⁴⁰

The motivation seems to peek through when Dawkins describes what he thinks might have been the feeling of a pre-Darwinian atheist:

An atheist before Darwin could have said, following Hume: 'I have no explanation for complex biological design. All I know is that God isn't a good explanation, so we must wait and hope

³⁸ *Blind Watchmaker*, 1.

³⁹ *Blind Watchmaker*, 5.

⁴⁰ *Blind Watchmaker*, xv.

that somebody comes up with a better one.' I can't help feeling that such a position, though logically sound, would have left one feeling pretty unsatisfied, and that although atheism might have been *logically* tenable before Darwin, Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist.⁴¹

In other words, atheism was the prior, preferred stance. Hume's philosophical argument might have made the position of an atheist logically possible; but it remained a pretty unsatisfying one, until Darwin came to the rescue and made it possible not only to continue to be an atheist, but now to feel oneself an intellectually fulfilled atheist. Atheism, obviously, had all the way along been the *a priori* preference, in spite of the overwhelming testimony of highly complex design in nature to a Conscious Designer.

We may quote Francis Crick again: 'Biologists must constantly keep in mind that what they see was not designed, but rather evolved.'⁴² The evidence for design is apparently so strong that biologists have constantly to make a conscious effort to resist it.

Biologists must constantly keep in mind that what they see was not designed, but rather evolved.
—Francis Crick, 'Lessons from Biology'

The SETI programme, which we discussed

earlier⁴³ sets its radio telescopes searching for any signals from outer space that might be coming from some intelligent source. Their hypothesis is that any signal which could be analysed as a code (and not just noise) would thereby be shown to be coming from an intelligent source. How? Because we know it as a basic fact that blind impersonal matter does not speak intelligent language; only persons do that. All scientists agree with the hypothesis.

But then the DNA double-helix has been shown to be a code conveying complex information. It, too, then, according to the same hypothesis, must have its origin in an Intelligent Source. Ah, but no! This time many people reject the hypothesis. Why? Because this time the Intelligent Source could only be God the Creator.

⁴¹ *Blind Watchmaker*, 6 (emphasis in original).

⁴² 'Lessons from Biology', 36.

⁴³ Introduction, p. 28.

The famous Marxist geneticist Richard Lewontin explains his position as a philosophical materialist: 'materialism is absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door.'⁴⁴

'They did not see fit', says Paul's analysis, 'to retain God in their knowledge'; and it adds that such an attitude is morally and spiritually culpable: people will be accountable to God for it. In saying so Paul is clearly talking not only about what happened to the early human race, but also about what happens to the modern human race as well.

The human race's progressive loss of freedom and its consequences

We now have ample evidence that the human race's flight from God has in all ages been motivated by a desire for moral and spiritual independence and freedom. But Paul's analysis is about to argue that humankind's flight from God, far from securing them independence and freedom, first devalues them, and then lands them ultimately and inevitably in a spiritual prison. It always has done; it still does.

Paul first shows this was so for early humankind. They grasped at independence of the One True God their Creator, only to find themselves now subject to a whole array of false gods. They had 'bartered away the truth of God for the lie', and now felt themselves compelled to offer reverence and worship to created things rather than to the Creator (cf. Rom 1:25).

At first sight it might seem strange that humankind should so demean themselves; and yet on second thoughts such behaviour is readily understandable. When man was still loyally dependent on God, he knew himself to be made in the image of God. He lived in fellowship with his creator; and since that fellowship was with the eternal God, it had an eternal dimension that even physical death could not destroy (see Matt 22:31–32).

In virtue of this, man knew himself to be superior in rank, dignity and significance to all the mere matter and forces of the universe. It wasn't, of course, that he could control them; he was, scientifically and technologically, still a child. But living in trustful dependence

⁴⁴ 'Billions and Billions of Demons'.

on their creator, he knew these forces to be his servants under the control of his Father, God.

But now, having chosen to go his own way independent of the Creator, he found himself increasingly alienated from him. Lacking trustful faith in him, he felt he was now on his own having to cope by himself with these powerful (and to him mysterious) forces on which his life depended and which could so easily destroy him. He must respect them: they were his masters. They controlled him, not he them.



What freedom is it for a rational human being to bow down like a slave to mindless, non-rational matter and forces?

So he defied them. He bowed down to the sun and the moon and the stars, to the mysterious powers of fertility, to the storm, to man's own physical powers of sex or aggressiveness, to blind Fate and Chance. He treated them all like gods. So much for freedom and independence! What freedom is it for a rational human being to bow down like a slave to mindless, non-rational matter and forces?

But he felt he had to. He could not control these forces. The best he could do was to reverence, worship, and sacrifice to the powers of Nature in the hope of persuading, cajoling, manipulating them to be favourable to him. He lived a life, not of freedom as a creature in the image of the Creator, but of servility to the non-rational powers of the universe.

But someone may well ask, 'What has that got to do with us. We don't bow down to, and worship, the non-rational powers of the universe. Thanks to science and technology we understand them. Indeed, we can harness some of them for our own use and betterment, thus lifting ourselves out of the ignorance, fear and superstition of pre-scientific humankind.'

Quite so; and a wonderful epic of human scientific effort and discovery it has been! In spite of all this progress, however, realism reminds us that humankind in the ultimate sense is no nearer controlling the great forces of the universe than ever they were. Take the first essential for the maintenance of human life on earth: light and heat. The source on which we are helplessly dependent for these necessities is not under our control, and never will be, let alone all the other forces and conditions that have been fine tuned to make life on our planet possible. Science itself, moreover, tells us that eventually our sun will explode and in that instant earth will evaporate. It does

not matter how far off into the future that event may be: logically, it makes no difference to the fact that human life on this planet as we have known it is a temporary phenomenon; one day it will be a thing of the past. Humankind is only a temporary tenant of earth.

But let's come nearer home: to our own lives here and now as individuals. Ask an atheist what ultimate powers were responsible for bringing him into the world, and what ultimate powers will cause his eventual demise, and the atheist will say (though in much more sophisticated language) exactly the same as the ancient idolater. He will say it was, and will be, the fundamental forces and processes of nature: energy, the weak atomic power, the strong atomic power, electro-magnetism, gravity, the laws of physics, chemistry, biochemistry, physiology and so forth. As Professor George Gaylord Simpson remarks, 'Man is the result of a purposeless and natural process that did not have him in mind. He was not planned.'⁴⁵ The atheist will not call these forces and processes gods, nor bow down and worship them. But it makes no difference: in the end, as at the beginning, they control him, not he them.

And the striking, but melancholy, fact is this: the atheist is a warm, feeling, purposeful, intelligent human being. But these forces which produced, and one day will destroy, him, his feelings, loves, purposes and intelligence are, all of them, by the atheist's own definition, non-rational, non-sentient, mindless and purposeless.

The atheist will claim that, in him, matter has evolved intelligence so that he can understand how these powers and processes work—though the powers and processes themselves don't know how they work. They had no purpose in mind—they don't have a mind⁴⁶—when they gave him birth. His existence, therefore, serves no ultimate purpose, and has no ultimate meaning. One day these same mindless forces will begin to destroy him. He will have the intelligence to see what they are going to do to him, but no power to stop them. The final irony will be that when these mindless forces have destroyed him and his



The final irony will be that when these mindless forces have destroyed him and his intelligence, they won't even know they've done it.

⁴⁵ *Meaning of Evolution*, 345.

⁴⁶ See the quotation from Dawkins, p. 139.

intelligence, they won't even know they've done it. Mindless, non-rationality will have triumphed over human conscious rationality and intelligence.

To a theist, then, the atheist's position cannot but seem self-defeating. He began his flight from God in order, among other things, to be able to give his rationality free rein without being curbed or restricted in any way by having to acknowledge a creator. He then uses his rationality to the full—only to discover that mindless matter and forces will eventually make a mock of his rationality and destroy both him and it without knowing they've done it. To the theist this use of rationality bears out what Paul's analysis says: 'Knowing God, they have refused to honour him as God, or to render him thanks. Hence all their thinking has ended in futility.' (Rom 1:21 NEB).

The atheist may well reply that theists die just the same as atheists do. Mindless forces and processes destroy their bodies and brains too.

Yes, but with this difference. The theist knows that she was not the product of blind matter and forces in the first place, but a creature of God, made in God's image. Secondly, she is not just matter, but spirit as well, able to form a spiritual relationship with God that, like God himself, is eternal. And as far as the forces of nature are concerned, Paul who wrote the analysis which we have been considering concludes by saying:

I am convinced that there is nothing in death or life, in the realm of spirits or superhuman powers, in the world as it is or the world as it shall be, in the forces of the universe, in height or depths—nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:38–39 NEB)

This the atheist cannot—perhaps does not want to—say. But it leaves him, so to speak, a prisoner in a materialistic universe in the certain expectation that mindless forces will eventually triumph over, and destroy, him, his mind, rationality and intelligence. It doesn't sound much like freedom. Professor William Provine of Cornell University, a leading historian of science, confesses it:

Finally, free will as it is traditionally conceived—the freedom to make uncoerced and unpredictable choices among alternative

possible courses of action—simply does not exist. . . . There is no way that the evolutionary process as currently conceived can produce a being that is truly free to make choices.⁴⁷

The human race's progressive loss of freedom and its degradation

According to Paul, man's original flight from God led him into perverse forms of religion: they 'exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things' (Rom 1:23).

At this the atheist may well retort—somewhat triumphantly, perhaps—that this is typical of all religion: it demeans human beings and alienates them from their true dignity with its absurd, degrading superstitions and rituals; and that is why atheism is implacably opposed to religion.

Did not Lenin say:

Every religious idea of a god, even flirting with the idea of a god, is unutterable vileness of the most dangerous kind, 'contagion' of the most abominable kind. Millions of sins, filthy deeds, acts of violence, and physical contagions are far less dangerous than the subtle spiritual idea of a god.⁴⁸

Other atheists will use milder language; but they will still criticise faith in God and religion as being at best a crutch for weak and inadequate people, a crutch which atheists pride themselves on not needing.

But things are not necessarily quite so simple. Secular humanists (humanist, as we recall, in the philosophical sense) are by definition atheists. Yet in America the 1980 preface to the *Humanist Manifestos I & II* itself announced 'Humanism is a philosophical, religious and moral point of view.'⁴⁹

In 1934 the notable humanist John Dewey, who rejected the supernatural in general and the supernatural God in particular, wrote a book entitled *A Common Faith* in which he stated:

⁴⁷ 'Evolution and the Foundation of Ethics.'

⁴⁸ *Complete Collected Works*, 35:122.

⁴⁹ Kurtz (ed.), 3.

Here are all the elements for a religious faith that shall not be confined to sect, class, or race. . . . It remains to make it explicit and militant.⁵⁰

At the centennial celebration of the publication of *On the Origin of Species* held by the University of Chicago in 1959, Sir Julian Huxley announced in his lecture:

Finally, the evolutionary vision is enabling us to discern, however incompletely, the lineaments of the new religion that we can be sure will arise to serve the needs of the coming era.⁵¹

Even Marxism—shocking though that might seem to Marxists—often appeared in the past to outsiders to have the characteristics of a religion. It had a basic creed that one had to take on faith, namely that there is nothing but matter in the universe, which, of course, cannot be proved. It had its gospel for the salvation of mankind: the irresistible law of historical dialectic.⁵² Marxism had its Mediator: the dictatorship of the Party. It had its promised land: the eventual advent of full communism, when all oppression, all strife, all alienation, all government would be gone forever; and it had its vigorous missionaries devoted to the spread of the Marxist gospel throughout the world. It also vigorously suppressed its ‘heretics’, or revisionists as they were called.⁵³

Be that as it may. The important thing is not whether it is or is not valid to attach the label ‘religion’ to some forms of atheism; it is that we should understand why, according to the Bible, suppression of belief in God inevitably results in idolatry.

The reason is this. It is in practice very difficult for a man or woman to place his or her ultimate faith and confidence in nothing

⁵⁰ p. 87. In more recent years American humanists for various practical and political reasons have dropped the terms ‘religious’ and ‘religion’ from their manifestos.

⁵¹ *Essays of a Humanist*, 91.

⁵² Cf. N. Berdyaev’s remark: ‘the dialectical materialist attribution of “dialectic” to matter confers on it, not mental attributes only, but even divine ones’. Cited from Wetter, *Dialectical Materialism*, 558.

⁵³ Cf. the estimate given by the famous humanist atheist, Bertrand Russell:

To call these religions [scil. Communism and Nazism] may perhaps be objectionable both to their friends and to their enemies, but in fact they have all the characteristics of religions. They advocate a way of life on the basis of irrational dogmas; they have a sacred history, a Messiah, and a priesthood. I do not see what more could be demanded to qualify a doctrine as a religion. (*Understanding History*, 95).

at all, as G. K. Chesterton long ago observed.⁵⁴ If they decline to put their ultimate faith in God, they will inevitably put it in something or someone else—or risk becoming thoroughgoing sceptics with regard to life’s purpose and meaning and prosperity.

An idol, then, according to biblical definition, is something or someone in whom a man puts his ultimate faith, instead of putting it in God. If then Feuerbach’s dictum, ‘MAN is man’s god’ (Feuerbach’s emphasis), rightly sums up the essential principle of his philosophy, his philosophy is straight idolatry.

This point was already perceived by ancient writers centuries ago. In the eighth to seventh century BC, for instance, the prophet Isaiah in a series of vivid vignettes describes what was going on in the minds of his contemporaries when they made idols:

To whom then will you liken God,
or what likeness compare with him?
An idol! A craftsman casts it,
and a goldsmith overlays it with gold
and casts for it silver chains.
He who is too impoverished for an offering
chooses wood that will not rot;
he seeks out a skilful craftsman
to set up an idol that will not move.

(Isa 40:18–20)

He shapes it into the figure of a man, with the beauty of a man,
. . . . And the rest of it [scil. the tree which he has cut down] he
makes into a god, his idol, and falls down to it and worships it. He
prays to it and says, ‘Deliver me, for you are my god!’ (44:13, 17)

Like all people everywhere in all ages, these ancient men and women felt the need for *salvation* in the broadest sense of that term—in the regular difficulties and crises of life. So they needed a god to save them, and they set about making one. Now, of course, they had their concepts of the qualities that their god would need to have, in

⁵⁴ The quote that is commonly attributed to Chesterton: ‘When a man stops believing in God he doesn’t then believe in nothing, he believes anything’, is drawn from two separate Chesterton quotes. The precise history of the quote and its various versions has been helpfully summarized in an article by The American Chesterton Society (<https://www.chesterton.org/ceases-to-worship/>).

order to save them. The first was durability. So they looked either for metal or for wood that would not easily rot. It would not be good to have a god that was liable to decay and go rotten!

The second quality they looked for in their concept of a god was stability. A god that was liable to wobble or topple over would be useless! So they stabilised their god with chains or nails so that it wouldn't fall over.

The third requirement was that their god should be rich in majesty and resources. So they decorated it with their silver and gold.

They made this god in the form of a man; and then they bowed down to it and prayed to it to save them. But what actually was this god of theirs? It was not, of course, the living God, Creator of heaven and earth such as Isaiah believed in. It was but the objectivisation of their own concepts projected on to the form of a man.⁵⁵

But now listen to the basic thesis of Feuerbach's philosophy: 'We have reduced', he says, 'the supermundane, supernatural, and superhuman nature of God to the elements of human nature as its fundamental elements. . . . The beginning, middle and end of religion is MAN'.⁵⁶

What he means by that is well summed up by M. J. Inwood of Trinity College, Oxford:

God is in fact the essence of man himself, abstracted from individual, embodied men, and objectified and worshipped as a distinct entity. . . . We need to heal the fissure between heaven and earth, to replace love of God by love of man, and faith in God by faith in man, to recognise that man's fate depends on man alone and not on supernatural forces.⁵⁷

So then, to say that God is love, means, according to Feuerbach, not that there is a self-existent God, independent of man, who loves man; it means simply, that love, human love, is an absolute. Similarly, according to Feuerbach, to say that God saves us, means that the in-

dividual man is weak and needs salvation; but that the god who saves him, is not God, but humanity as a whole:

All divine attributes, all the attributes that make God God, are attributes of the species—attributes which in the individual are limited, but the limits of which are abolished in the essence of the species, and even in its existence, in so far as it has its complete existence only in all men taken together. My knowledge, my will, is limited; but my limit is not the limit of another man, to say nothing of mankind; what is difficult to me is easy to another; what is impossible, inconceivable, to one age, is to the coming age conceivable and possible. My life is bound to a limited time; not so the life of humanity.⁵⁸

On this principle, then, to say that God is almighty must mean that humanity as a whole is almighty. Not any one generation of humanity, of course; for each generation proves flawed, grows old, decays, dies. But somehow all generations put together as a whole are almighty.

Two comments are in order. For humans to put their ultimate faith in humanity like this is clearly beyond all doubt the exercise of religious faith. Secondly, humanity as a god would seem to suffer from the same disadvantages as the ancient wooden and metal idols: it is apt to go rotten and topple over. History suggests that so far from humanity being able to save us, it is humanity itself that needs to be saved.

⁵⁵ In this, one suspects, Isaiah would have agreed with Freud's view of man-made religion; though, of course, he would have criticised Freud severely for confusing man-made religion with faith in the living God.

⁵⁶ *Essence of Christianity*, 184.

⁵⁷ Inwood, 'Feuerbach, Ludwig Andreas', 276b.

⁵⁸ *Essence of Christianity*, 152.